



The struggles of rural Oregon

It is rough out there: Family wage jobs are scarce, and often government seems to do more harm than good

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We weren't too surprised this week to hear leaders of rural Oregon talking about "the tyranny of the majority."

That would be urban Oregonians.

By which rural Oregonians mean those cappuccino-quaffing, bicycle-riding, tofurkey-gobbling tree huggers who just don't get it.

Truth be told, rural Oregonians have much to be mad about these days. Gov. Ted Kulongoski's decision early this year to pull the plug on the Office of Rural Policy was a mistake. While shaving a pittance from the state budget, it seemed to send a signal from the highest level: Salem doesn't care.

Then came the failure by Oregon's congressional delegation to salvage anything from the sundowning of county timber payments. In recent years, Uncle Sam has shipped hundreds of millions of dollars to rural Oregon to offset revenue lost by reduced logging on public lands. That money paid for cops, libraries, parks, roads, schools -- in short, for civic services core to rural life.

Those two issues surfaced as rural Oregon took its most recent wash through the news cycle. But people in rural parts of our state -- that's just about everywhere beyond the Willamette Valley -- remain deeply mired in systemic mud.

Hunger. Housing. Health care. And don't even get them started on jobs. Or the critical lack of access to capital. Or how their roads and bridges are falling apart. And their forests are going up in flames.

Too many urban decisions ignite wildfires of unintended consequence that ravage rural communities. That's because for too many Oregonians, the postcard parts of this state remain playgrounds and are seen that way.

As they drive home, they might do well to remember just how much of this state's wealth, plywood to pinot noir, remains tied up in rural lands.

In Cascade Locks this week, almost 200 people gathered for the first meeting of the Oregon Rural Congress, an effort to pioneer a common agenda. The smartest ones in the room were those looking forward rather than back.

It's easy to blame urban Oregonians for having destroyed life as rural Oregonians wanted to live it. But rural leaders better be careful calling for too close an accounting of how public money is allocated in this state.

By some estimates, a billion dollars or more of state taxes collected from urban Oregon are sent around the state to pay for rural schools. There's nothing wrong with that policy -- every child in this state deserves an equal -- and good -- education.

Yet it must be plainly understood that Oregonians are in this together, and there's no future in deepening the political divide in this state. Rural Oregon needs help. But it doesn't need to blame Portland for all its problems.